The Natchez Diaspora: A History of Indigenous Displacement and Survival in Early America

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Who are the Natchez?

The Natchez are a Native American group originally living near modern-day Natchez, Mississippi when the French first made contact in 1682. Initially, the Natchez and French maintained a mostly peaceful relationship for close to fifty years. However, in 1729, the Natchez attacked the French, disrupting the fragile diplomatic balance between the two groups. The French retaliated in 1731 and drove the Natchez away from their ancestral homelands.

The End of the Natchez?

While the Natchez faced extreme adversity after their war with the French, their history did not end in 1731. However, most scholars have focused exclusively on Natchez history only up to the early 1730s. For over 250 years, the dominant narrative of Natchez history is one of “noble” Natchez resistance against French colonial aggression that ultimately resulted in the destruction of the Natchez as a people. Even in contemporary scholarship, many historians write as if the Natchez no longer exist, having “vanished” long ago. But the Natchez continue to exist in diasporic communities across the southeastern United States to the present.

Archival Research

Since the Natchez diaspora was on the move for most of the eighteenth century, they appear in the colonial records of France, England and Spain as well as the early national archives of the United States. In order to track the Natchez diaspora, I conducted research in a diverse array of archives in France, England, California, Pennsylvania, North and South Carolina, Louisiana, and Oklahoma.

Oral History and Collaboration

Since 2010, I have collaborated with the Natchez in Oklahoma. In return for sharing my archival notes and discoveries, the Natchez have provided me with information about the Natchez past that could not be gathered through the written archive alone. For example, I compiled Natchez names remembered in oral histories and borrowed from the work of contemporary Natchez genealogists to locate Natchez individuals formerly shrouded in eighteenth century documents. Natchez oral history and local knowledge, in addition to providing insight into contemporary Natchez understanding of their own history, are vital sources for uncovering Natchez history in the eighteenth century.

Conclusions

♦ Natchez Survival

Examining closely different Natchez communities over time, I explore how the Natchez diaspora survived multiple colonial displacements and how Natchez identities and community formation changed over time, in different locations, and in response to contact with different European and Native American populations. The diasporic Natchez communities reveal that Natchez culture and identity construction changed in multiple directions, not just in response to European colonists but in response to Creeks and Cherokee as well. However, and perhaps remarkably, the effect of cultural change in most of the diasporic Natchez communities did not erase a sense of Natchez identity. Rather, this sense of Natchez-ness, while variously constructed in different contexts over time, remained important for most Natchez to distinguish themselves from Americans, Europeans, and other Native Americans.

♦ Native American Slaves in the Caribbean

The existence of thousands of Native American slaves, including the Natchez, in the Caribbean requires scholars to re-conceptualize the history of slavery in the early modern Caribbean to include, not only the history of Africans and Europeans, but Native Americans from North America as well.

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